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ARGENTINA: General Viola's Key Role

[redacted] 3.5(c)

When the Argentine military overthrew the government of Mrs. Peron in March 1976, it promised to bring political, social, and economic change to Argentina. Commander of the Army Lt. Gen. Roberto Viola is rapidly emerging as the central figure in that process. He is likely to play a significant role in resolving disparate views within the military leadership concerning how to effect this national reorganization. If Viola succeeds President Videla in March of 1981--as now seems likely--he may be given a mandate to lay the groundwork for a return to civilian rule. [redacted] 3.5(c)

Viola is the senior member of the ruling military junta, as well as Videla's closest confidant and strongest supporter. The general, like Videla a political moderate, assumed the Army's top job in August of last year, but only after a promise to military hardliners that he would resign his commission this December. 3.5(c) [redacted]

Because of continuing policy disagreements with the hardliners, Viola's impending retirement poses several problems. To provide continuity for Videla's moderate policies and to prepare for his own accession to the presidency, Viola probably will seek to neutralize those hardliners who threaten the planned succession. [redacted] 3.5(c)

An abortive revolt in Cordoba Province in late September by one of the government's two principal antagonists, Army III Corps Commander Luciano Menendez, should make Viola's task easier. [redacted] 3.5(c)

Menendez--who was distraught over the release of political detainee Jacobo Timerman and over renewed terrorist activity by the leftist Montoneros--tried to oust Viola as Army commander. Viola moved swiftly to relieve Menendez of his command. Although Menendez' redoubt was quickly surrounded by 4,000 paratroops, he managed to hold out for two days. [redacted] 3.5(c)

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Menendez was subsequently placed under a 90-day house arrest and retired from the Army. A number of officers who supported Menendez were either arrested or dismissed from their posts. Menendez' incarceration will last through the end-of-year military promotion and retirement cycle; thus, he will be muzzled during the period in which crucial decisions will be made concerning the military succession. [redacted] 3.5(c)

With Menendez out of the picture, the other key Army hardliner--Chief of Staff General Suarez-Mason--probably has suffered a reversal in his bid to succeed Viola as head of the Army. When Menendez' revolt was announced, Suarez-Mason--who commands no field troops--had little choice but to side with Viola. [redacted] 3.5(c)

Viola may now be free to name a moderate successor as Army commander and to ease Suarez-Mason into retirement. The appointment of a moderate probably would have some positive effects:

-- Policies affecting the human rights of peaceful political dissidents probably would be further liberalized.

-- Political parties might officially resume activities as early as next summer.

-- A mutually beneficial dialogue would be facilitated with the once powerful labor movement.

-- Pressures to pursue a military solution over the Beagle Channel controversy with Chile would be reduced. [redacted] 3.5(c)

3.3(b)(1) [redacted]

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3.3(b)(6)

If Viola [redacted] is able to resolve the succession issue, he reportedly will use the period from his retirement to his designation as president-select next September to develop a civilian cadre capa-
3.3(b)(1) ble of running the country. [redacted] he has already requested assistance from democratic leaders in Spain in setting up such a program. [redacted] 3.5(c)

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